

Stockpiling and Extended Grazing

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Cost control is the most important factor in the profitability of Iowa's grazing herds. The cheapest method to feed a ewe or cow is for them to harvest the daily requirements via grazing. Beef cow SPA data indicates that cost per grazing day is roughly one third as much as costs of maintaining a cow via harvested feedstuffs. The less an operation feeds and more animals graze dramatically improves profits. This improvement comes primarily from lower feed costs but also less hay production and harvest costs or more hay marketed.

As one contemplates beginning an extended grazing season with stockpiled forage, one must evaluate the summer forage system. Forage acres must be set aside in August through September to allow forage to stockpile. In many systems, there are no extra acres that one can set aside for forage accumulation. The easiest means of getting additional acres for stockpiling is to convert hay acres after second cutting to stockpile acres. However, this assumes that this hay ground is not being grazed in August and September. Additional challenges to getting acres set aside is that stocking rates in cow calf units are highest at that time with unweaned calves are consuming a lot of grass. If the summer system has excess forage than stockpiling and extended grazing can be considered. If the operation's summer system requires all the forage acres in August along with some harvested feedstuffs, focus should be on improving the summer system. Once the summer system is not longer requiring supplementation than one can contemplate extended winter grazing with stockpiled forage.

Extended grazing can use crop residues and/or stockpiled forages. Some form of restricted access on corn crop residue acres can increase cow grazing days by 20 percent or more. Ideally cows need approximately one half to one acre of corn stalks per month. So for 100 beef cows, one should provide at least 25 acres of new cornstalk acres per week. If one has an entire section of row crop to graze that is in a corn soybean rotation, then give cows access to a third of corn acres each month can dramatically lengthen the winter grazing. Cornstalk acres should be grazed first since nutrient quality declines more rapidly than stockpiled forage. If possible renting cornstalk acres from neighbors should be strongly considered as a low cost means of extending the grazing season.

Stockpiled forage is the last means of extended grazing. Each operation needs to determine how many acres of stockpile are required to meet the winter grazing target. Obviously the more acres of crop residue one has access to the less stockpiled grass is needed. One of the critical factors for wintergrazing of stockpiled forage is quality so that cows aggressively graze even through 6-8 inches of snow. The second factor for success is adequate dry matter available. Cows start challenging fences when the

pickens get to slim. To insure both quality and quantity, one needs to begin the accumulation of forage after August 1. Additionally, 40-60 pounds of actual nitrogen will increase yield and quality. Fall moisture is the greatest uncertainty of stockpiled grazing. Work at Iowa State University has reported yields of 1500-3000 pounds of dry matter. One last method to improve stockpiled forage quality is maintain a 20-40% legume component in the sward. Frost seeding 3-5 pounds of red clover is generally the most economical method. How often one frost seeds is highly dependent on soil seed bank and frost seeding success, but annually to every third year is appropriate.

Iowa State University Extension and Iowa Beef Center have developed a planning tool to evaluate winter grazing options. Interested operations should contact their county extension office to identify their livestock field specialist or call the Iowa Beef Center at 800-294-2333. These people can help you plan your summer and winter grazing systems to best meet the your farm goals.